



Louis H. Bruni  
County Judge

1000 Houston St. 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
Laredo, Texas 78040

(956) 523-4600  
Fax (956) 523-5065

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Guest Commentary by Webb County Judge Louis H. Bruni  
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CONTACT: Raul Casso  
(956) 523-4600

#### WEBB COUNTY INVITES LAREDO'S COOPERATION ON FIFTH BRIDGE

Recently, the *Express-News* ran an editorial regarding the proposed fifth international bridge that would connect Webb County, Texas with Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas, Mexico. The writer correctly observed that local cooperation is essential to gaining federal approval of international bridge applications, a process that is highly complicated and can take many years.

Where the writer missed the mark, however, is on the reasons why there is a lack of local cooperation.

Upon being sworn in as the new Webb County judge six months ago, I inherited the conflict between the city and county regarding the proposed fifth bridge. After considering the \$2 million that Webb County taxpayers had invested in completing the numerous steps to prepare a bridge application, I could not in good conscience let those resources go to waste.

As a former Laredo city council member, I approached my old colleagues during the spring to see if we could work out an agreement in which the county and city would split the development and construction costs of the bridge and jointly present the bridge application that Webb County had already completed. I proposed that the county would pay the city a management fee to operate the bridge, and the city and county would share in the bridge revenues. While Laredo Mayor Betty Flores initially seemed open to the idea, the city abruptly closed the door on any kind of bridge partnership with the county.

At that same time, the budget news from Austin and its long-term impact on Webb County's budget was becoming increasingly bleak. Webb County faces more than \$55 million in state budget cuts, which means the county must scramble to continue providing needed services to more than 7,000 families who are losing medical coverage, while trying not to raise local property taxes. And that's just in the area of health care.

Given the city's rejection of our invitations for a bridge partnership, coupled with the severe impact of impending state budget cuts, I and a majority of the county commissioners felt we had no choice but to continue pursuing the fifth bridge – independently if necessary – to ensure a return on the county's investment and to secure long-term sources of revenue to support vital county services.

However, as I have repeatedly stated, the county's preference would be to have a partnership with the city, and our door will continue to be open. We believe the taxpayers of both Webb County and the City of Laredo would be best served by a collaborative effort, particularly since Webb County has already received preliminary approval of its bridge application from the Texas Department of Transportation. A TxDOT official noted the county was "several steps ahead of the city" in the bridge application process, so it seems like a waste of taxpayers' money for the city to duplicate what the county has already completed.

In other border communities, such as Cameron and Hidalgo counties here in Texas and Yuma County, Arizona, local governments have successfully formed cooperative intergovernmental partnerships to pursue bridges and border crossings.

Given the numerous benefits of a fifth bridge not only for the citizens who are jointly served by the City of Laredo and Webb County, but also for our state and our nation, we continue to hold out hope that the City of Laredo will adopt Webb County's cooperative spirit so the fifth international bridge can become a reality.

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